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‘AL SHECHITAH.

FROM THE YIDDISH OF N. BYÂLIK'S VERSION OF
A HEBREW POEM BY HIMSELF.

OF steel and iron, cold and hard and dumb,
Now forge thyself a heart, O man! and come
And walk the town of slaughter. Thou shalt see
With waking eyes, and touch with conscious hands,
On fences, posts, and doors,
On paving in the street, on wooden floors,
The black, dried blood, commingled here and there
With brains and splintered bone.
And thou shalt wander in and out of ruins,
Of broken walls, doors wrenched from off their hinges,
Stoves overturned, dilapidated hearths,
And singèd beams laid bare, and half-burnt bricks,
Where axe and flame and iron yesternight
Danced a wild dance and led the bloody revel.
Then, creep to attics, clamber over roofs,
Peep in where all the black and yawning holes
Appear like ragged wounds that neither wait
Nor hope for healing more in all this world.
Outside, the sultry air is thick with feathers,
And thou shalt think to wade as in a river,
A flow of human sweat, the sweat of anguish.
Thou stumblest over heaps of goods and chattels—
They're just whole lives of men, whole lives of men,
Like broken potsherds, past all mending ever—
Thou walkest, runnest, fallest in the wreckage,
In cushions, tinsel, linings, silk and satin,
All dragged and rent and torn to bits and trampled—
They're holidays and Sabbaths, joy of feast-days—

And scarfs and prayer-books, parchments, scraps of Torah,
The white and holy wrappings of thy soul.
Look, look! they fold themselves about thy feet,
They kiss thy very footmarks in the dust . . .
Thou fleest! whither? back to light and air?
Run, run! the sky will laugh thee, man, to scorn!
The sun will blind thee with his glowing spears,
Acacias hung with tassels white and green
Will poison thee with smells of blood and flowers,
And blooms and feathers fall on thee in showers.
A thousand, thousand shivered bits of glass
Shall twinkle in thy dazzled eyes—behold!
For now is given thee a wondrous thing,
A twofold gift, a slaughter and a spring!
The garden blossomed and the sun shone bright,
The Shochet slaughtered!
The knife was sharp and glistened, from the wound
Flowed blood and gold.
Thou seek'st the shelter of a court! in vain!
A heap of refuse. They beheaded twain:
A Jew—his dog, with hatchets, yesterday,
Toward the centre of the court. This morning
A hungry pig came by and dragged them hither,
And routed, grunting, in their mingled blood.
Let be! to-morrow there will fall a shower
And wash the blood into the drain, and stifle
Its cry to heaven for vengeance; some, maybe,
Has sunk already deep, deep down, and feeds
The thorny tangle of a crooked hedge.
And calmly, like to-day and yesterday,
The sun will rise to-morrow, in the East,
Its splendour not diminished in the least,
And just as nothing were, pursue its way . . .
Go, half distraught, and scramble to a garret,
And there remain alone in musty gloom.
Alone? the fear of death is breathing round thee!
It fans the dark with black and chilly feathers

And lifts each single hair upon thy head.
Look, here and here, and in between the rafters,
Are eyes and eyes that gaze at thee in silence,
The eyes of martyred souls,
Of hunted, harried, persecuted souls,
Who've huddled all together in the corner,
And press each other closer still and quake;
For here it was the sharpened axes found them,
And they have come to take another look,
And in the apple of each staring eye
To glass once more the picture of their end,
Of all the terror of their savage death,
Of all the suff'ring of their dreary lives.
And, trembling like a crowd of startled doves,
They flutter in a cluster to the ceiling,
And thence they gaze at thee with dumb, wild eyes,
That follow thee and ask the old, old question,
The one that never yet has reached to heaven,
And never will:
For what, for what? and once again, for what?
Yes, crane thy neck . . . behold, there *is* no heaven!
There's nothing but a roof of blackened tiles.
Thence hangs a spider—go and ask the spider!
She saw it all, and she's a living witness,
The old grey spider spinning in the garret.
She knows a lot of stories—bid her tell them!
A story of a belly stuffed with feathers,
Of nostrils and of nails, of heads and hammers,
Of men who, after death, were hung head downward,
Like geese, along the rafter.
A story of a suckling child asleep,
A dead and cloven breast between its lips,
And of another child they tore in two,
Thus cutting short its last and loudest scream,
For "Ma-", was heard, but "Mame" never finished.
And many, many more such fearful stories
That beat about thy head and pierce thy brain,

And stab the soul within thee, does she know.
 And, stifling down the sob within thy throat,
 Thou rushest headlong down the stairs and out—
 To see again the world of ev'ry day,
 The usual sun, outpouring unashamed
 A wealth of beams at every guilty threshold,
 And lavish of its store on worse than swine.

.
 Descend into the vale where smiles a garden,
 Where in the garden stands a silent shed.
 As though they slept upon their sleeping victims
 Like vampyres drunk with blood,
 Behold a heap of cartwheels piled together,
 And bent and broken, splashed with blood and marrow.
 And some there are with open spikes that point
 Like murd'rous fingers clutching at a throat.
 Yet wait without! When fiery and bloody
 The sun has set beneath the western sky,
 Then steal thee thief-like back into the shed,
 And fall a prey to terror . . .
 To terror! see, it hovers in the air
 And clings about the walls and soaks the stillness.
 Hush, listen well! the wheels begin to move,
 Torn shreds of limbs are live again beneath them,
 They twitch convulsively in blood, their own, they
 anguish.

A quiet groan, a rattle in the throat
 Of one not killed outright, a last low sigh,
 A smothered scream, and then a grind of teeth.
 All this is there alive beneath the wheels,
 And fastens on the beams and on the rafters
 And squeezes in at ev'ry crack and hole,
 Or else hangs midway in the shudd'ring air,
 A canopy above thy sickened head.
 A speechless woe, because beyond all words,
 Trouble and sorrow infinite . . . but hush,
 There's some one else beside thee, slowly feeling

His way in darkness and with closèd eyes.
 And, sunk in great abysses of distress,
 He stretches out before him two thin hands
 Toward the depth obscure alive with fears,
 And probes the darkness with his ten blind fingers,
 But seeking for no outlet . . .
 'Tis he, 'tis he himself, the voiceless Spirit
 Of Pain, a captive of his own accord,
 And one who, pitiless, condemned himself
 To endless ages of unuttered woe.
 And hov'ring in the shed around you twain
 Is Nong-venòd¹, the Homeless One, who rests not,
 And never finds a corner on a foothold,
 A sable Presence, weary, deathly weary.
 O pitiful! 'twere fain to weep, and cannot,
 To give one cry, but one, and still is silent,
 And chokes and struggles with the tears unshed,
 And spreads its pinions o'er the slaughtered martyrs,
 And hides away its face, dissolved in sorrow,
 And weeps within itself without a language.
 Hush, go thou softly now and shut the door,
 And eye to eye remain with it alone,
 And let its burning wrongs and aching griefs
 For ever interpenetrate thy soul.
 When all within thee's died away to silence,
 Go, touch its wounds, and they will live and speak.
 Then bear its woes' remembrance in thy breast
 To all the confines of the whole wide world,
 And seek a name for them, and find it never . . .
 Now go without the town when none may see thee,
 And steal thee softly to the place of burial;
 And stand beside the martyrs' new-made graves,
 And stand and look and let thine eyelids fall—
 And turn to stone.
 Thy heart shall fail within thee, but thine eye,

¹ *Nong-venòd*, Heb. נֹגַד וְנֹדָד. *Sein nong-venòd*—a Yiddish expression = to be wandering from pillar to post.

Burn hot and tearless as the desert sand.
Thy mouth shall open to shriek aloud for vengeance,
And dumb as are the tombstones shalt thou stand.
Go, look and look, behold them where they lie
Like butchered calves, and yet thou hast no tear
To give to them, as I have no reward.
For I have hither come, O ye dead bones,
To beg of you, forgive me!
Forgive your God, you that are shamed for ever!
For all your dark and bitter lives forgive me,
And for your ten times dark and bitter death!
For when you stand to-morrow at my threshold,
When you remind me, when you ask for payment,
I shall but answer you: "Come, see, I've nothing!"
It cries to heaven, I hear it, but I've nothing.
For I am poor myself, I'm beggared also.
And woe and woe and woe is all my worlds!
Let all the seven heavens moan for pity.
To bring such sacrifices all for nothing,
To live such lives and die such deaths for nothing,
Not knowing to what end, for what, for what!
Her head enwrapped in clouds, my old Shechinah
Shall sit for evermore and weep for shame;
And night by night I too will lean from heaven
And mourn *myself* upon *your* graves.
The shame is very great and great the anguish,
And which is greater, say thou, son of man!
No, best keep silent, be a speechless witness,
Nor testify with words to having found me
In poverty and having seen my woe.
Yet, son of man, departing take with thee
A portion of my sorrow and my care,
And mingle it with wrath and cast it from thee
To fill the lap of corpses still alive.

What now? go back and gaze on leaves and grass?
The fresh and fragrant message of the spring

Steals in upon thine heart and there awakes
A longing for a new and freer life . . .
The grass is grave-grass, man, and smells of death.
Tear out a handful, fling it down behind thee,
And say, with closed eyes :
“ My people is as grass pluckt up, and how
Shall that which has no root revive and live ? ”
Come, look no more, come back to those yet living.
To-day 's a fast-day, come where stands the Shool,
And plunge thy soul in tears, their sea of tears.
Thou hear'st the lamentations and the moans
From open mouths, from out between locked teeth.
The rent and quiv'ring sounds, like things alive,
Unite, and—hearken ! now they rise again
In one despairing wail of misery,
That tosses still between a damp, dark ceiling
And upturned faces all awry with pain.
A sudden horror chills you to the bone :
Thus wails a people only that is lost,
Whose soul is dust and ashes, and their heart
A scorched desert. . . .
No root of hatred, not a blade of vengeance,
For hark, they beat the breast and cry, *As'hamnu !*
They pray of me forgiveness for their sin.
Their sin ? the sin of shadows on the wall,
The sin of broken pots, of bruised worms !
What will they ? why stretch out their hands to me ?
Has none a fist ? And where's a thunderbolt
To take revenge for all the generations,
To blast the world and tear the heav'ns asunder
And wreck the universe, my throne of glory ?

And hear, thou son of man !
When next the reader cries upon the platform,
“ Arise, O God, avenge the slaughtered victims,
Avenge thy holy ones, the pious greybeards,
The suckling children, God, the little children ! ”

And all the people cry with him together,
And when, like thee, the very pillars tremble,
I will be cruel to thee, very cruel,
For thou shalt have no single tear to shed;
And should a cry arise in thee, I'll choke it,
Between thy teeth, if need be, I will choke it.
I will not have thee mourn as do the others.
The tear unshed, that bury in thyself,
Deep down within thy heart, and build a tower
Of gall and hatred round it; let it lie
A serpent in a nest (and men shall suck
And pass its venom on),
With thirst and hunger still unsatisfied.
And when the day of retribution comes,
Then break the wall and let the serpent out,
And like a poisoned arrow shoot it forth
With hunger raging and with thirsty fang,
And pierce thy race, thine own race, through the heart!

To-morrow, son of man, go pace the street:
Behold a market full of living ware,
Of bruised and beaten, half-dead human cattle,
With bent and twisted backs,
Of skin and bones tied up in rags,
Of maimed and crippled children, and of women
All fagged and parched, and these,
Like locusts or the latter summer flies,
Besieging doors and windows, ev'ry gateway,
And stretching out crooked hands with fest'ring wounds
(The hands have only lately learnt to beg),
And crying each his merchandise of woe:

"A groschen for a wound, a groschen for a wound!
A groschen for a violated daughter!
A groschen for a grandsire done to death,
And for a son, a boy just ripe for marriage!"

Go, tramping pedlars, seek the field of victims,
And dig white bones from out your new-made graves,
And fill your baskets, ev'ry one his basket.
Go out into the world, and drag them with you,
From town to town, wherever there's a market,
And spread them out before the strangers' windows,
And sing hoarse beggar-songs, and ask for pity!
And beg your way, and trade as heretofore
In flesh and blood, your own. . . .

Now flee, O son of man, for ever flee,
And hide thee in the desert—and go mad!
There rend thy soul into a thousand pieces,
And fling thy heart to all wild dogs for food!
The burning stones shall hiss beneath thy tears,
And stormy winds shall swallow up thy cry!

HELENA FRANK.